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ABSTRACT

Common in the 1960s, marathon groups are now rarely used. With the emerging effects of managed care, short-term brief focused therapies have become the therapeutic norm, and group counseling has become popular because of its low cost and therapeutic effectiveness. Most groups at university counseling centers run for one semester. A strategically scheduled marathon or extended group session during the ongoing group may help clients to integrate and apply what they have learned, perhaps preventing further need for ongoing therapy support. The marathon can also provide benefits to group cohesion, group processing, and the effective interaction of members. Techniques for holding extended group sessions within the structure of ongoing group counseling are described. The preparation of the group, integration of the extended session into the group structure, structure of the session, possible exercises, and postevent processing are described. Marathon sessions are compared to ongoing group sessions and shorter, but extended, group sessions. The advantages and disadvantages of using this intervention are discussed, and group effects are explored. Future research is suggested. Appendices include examples of marathon schedule, family role play exercise, imagery and family portrait exercise and group sculpting. (Contains 12 references.) (EMK)

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Extended Sessions in Ongoing Process Groups at University Counseling Centers

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Abstract

Once common in the 1960s, marathon groups are now rarely used. With the emerging effects of managed care, short-term brief focused therapies have become the therapeutic norm. Most groups at university counseling centers run for one semester. Extended group sessions may be strategically held during ongoing groups to help clients to integrate and apply what they have learned, perhaps preventing further need for ongoing therapy support. This paper describes extended group sessions, how they may differ from regular ongoing group sessions, and the advantages and disadvantages of using this intervention.

Extended Sessions in Ongoing Process Groups at University Counseling Centers

Introduction

Marathon Groups were popular across the United States during the 1960s. Since the mid 1970s, research and articles about extended group sessions or marathon groups have curtailed (Kilmann & Sotile, 1976; van Quekelberghe & Droste, 1975/76; Weigel, 1977). With the emerging effects of managed care, short-term brief focused therapies have become the therapeutic norm, and group counseling has become popular due to its cost and therapeutic effectiveness.

Most groups offered at university counseling centers run for one semester, usually ranging from 10 to 15 sessions in length. Although positive change is realized in these groups, clients often report the need to join a second group or return to individual therapy to achieve their therapeutic goals. Some clients report "just getting started" when the group therapy ends. Often there is not enough time to adequately integrate what has been learned from the group process.

A strategically scheduled marathon or extended group session during the ongoing group can help to move clients further in their goals and can assist in the integration of feedback received during the group process. In addition, marathon sessions offer longer blocks of time that enable clients to explore issues and feelings at a deeper level. Heightened cohesion, further growth, and integration of the group experience are all potential benefits of extended group sessions (Allen, 1990; Gadsden, 1981; Jones, 1978; Mintz, 1967).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the preparation and structure of extended group psychotherapy sessions held within the context of ongoing group counseling. Advantages and disadvantages of the intervention are discussed and future considerations are explored.

Preparation and Goals of Extended Group Sessions

Although some therapists prefer to implement the same format used in the regular group sessions and simply extend the time, this author recommends setting the marathon off as a unique experience. Extended group sessions can take place during one full day (6-8 hours), or can be split up over a two-day period with an initial "stirring up" session (2 hours) the night before.

Prior to the session, the therapist(s) can generally describe what the day will entail to insure informed consent. This can be accomplished via group discussion prior to the session and by giving group members a descriptive handout which might outline the general structure for the day and address issues such as bringing a sweater for temperature fluctuations, taking high energy snacks to eat during breaks, and discussing arrangements for lunch. Also, it is helpful to ask the group questions in preparation for the experience such as: What would you most like to change about yourself? What is the greatest hope for the extended group experience? What is your biggest fear about the experience (whether realistic or not)? What are your expectations for the marathon group experience?

The build up of anxiety created by anticipating the extended session can be useful in getting individuals to be in a place where they want to do some intensive therapeutic work. Kilmann (1974) demonstrated that extended therapy group sessions can generate heightened emotional tension often seen as a necessary condition for substantive change. The level of anxiety experienced by group members needs to be monitored and processed regularly throughout the extended session. Therapists need to make clear that group members always have the choice of participating or not participating in a given exercise or experience. This may paradoxically help

group members to participate more fully and trust the process of the experience.

One technique that can be used to increase the power and cohesion of the group is to have group members decide whether and when to have an extended group session. The process of deciding whether to commit to this experience can help members to get closer to each other, often by working though the conflicts and resistance that might emerge during the decision process. Ideally, the decision to participate in a marathon group should be unanimous; however, on a number of occasions having one member not participate in the experience actually proved to be therapeutically powerful for the individual and the group. In one situation, a group member who always acquiesced to the needs of others rather than her own, asserted that she needed to not be a part of the marathon session just prior to thinking about quitting the group because she thought she would have to participate. Her assertive choice was honored and supported by the group. When the group returned from the experience, the group member was able to give feedback to the group about how they had moved to a much deeper and more intimate level of interaction.

One of the main goals of an extended group session is to add something to the group experience that might not have been possible otherwise during the regular group sessions. The extended group experience helps short-term groups to speed up the developmental process by increasing group cohesion, providing a safe and adequate space to deal with conflicts, assisting in the integration of things learned in the group, and by encouraging members to try out new behaviors that would increase the joy and feelings of connectedness in their daily lives.

Structure of the Extended Group Session

Initially a warm-up or opening exercise can be helpful to begin to set the tone for the day and to have clients acclimate to the new surroundings. This may help to temper some of the initial anticipatory anxiety. Because the group members have already built trust, ice breaking or "getting to know you" exercises are unnecessary, so leaders can quickly focus on the goals of the day. See Appendix A for an outline of one marathon session. The beginning session might be accompanied with lively but pleasant music. Sometimes allowing group members to mingle and slowly get ready for the first more structured activity can be useful. One idea is for group members to come in approximately ten minutes before the session begins and have them fill out "name" tags indicating not their name, but their goals and expectations for the day and how they are feeling. Participants can mingle and share what their tags say during the warm-up period.

When the session begins, group leaders may want to process how individuals feel in the moment, and have members verbalize their hopes and expectations for the day. An initial open-ended process session may be useful in bridging to the new experience of the marathon session. It also allows them to voice any conflicts, concerns or anxieties they may have. Although a schedule of events is set up for the day, group leaders need to be receptive to the needs of the group. Often a change in the schedule (e.g., making a very beneficial experience longer, eliminated or switching around the order of activities to fit with the needs of the group) is needed to maximize the group experience. Flexibility allows for a more natural and useful flow of events during the day.

Examples of structured group exercises used during the day might include family of origin drawings (e.g., genograms, drawing a childhood house), role playing of various family members, group sculpting, or feedback exercises. Descriptions of some of these exercises can be found in the appendices. Depending on the facilities available for the marathon session, different locations in the room can be used for different activities. For example, if group members are drawing they could use the floor. When doing the feedback exercise, chairs can be arranged in a semi-circle with one chair in the middle designated as the feedback chair. The exercises can be planned to move from past issues and family of origin concerns to more present issues and interactions. It is also helpful to include time devoted to a regular process group during the day.

The main focus of the day can be tailored to the needs and goals of the group. For example, groups working on family of origin issues might be helped by exercises that tap into these areas. Other groups that are focussing more on the interpersonal relationships within the group might benefit from more "here and now" activities. Of course, as illustrated in the marathon session in Appendix A, both areas can be addressed.

Group members have reported that the feedback exercise was one of the most powerful interventions during the marathon session. In this exercise clients are asked to think of positive and negative feedback for each group member. This is announced one to two weeks before the marathon session begins. Each member is given approximately ten minutes on the "hot seat," during which time they receive feedback from the group, getting to choose which type of feedback they want first. Afterwards, clients have an opportunity to respond to the feedback.

Using movement exercises, especially after lunch, can be helpful to keep the energy level up and can increase the feelings of cohesiveness among group members. These exercises can provide another medium for clients to express feelings and work on their goals. Each movement exercise can be followed by the opportunity for the members to process the experience. Finally, closure exercises can be a combination of open-ended processing of the day's experiences and a more structured relaxation/hypnosis integrative experience. Processing of the marathon experience usually continues during the regular group sessions and into termination.

Comparison of Marathon Sessions with Ongoing Group Sessions

There are several ways that the marathon group may differ from the regularly scheduled group meetings. By setting off the extended group experience from the regular group sessions, group members may benefit richly from this unique and challenging situation. One group member fondly referred to the marathon group as the 'overnight group.' The variety of changes in the extended group often help members to take substantial risks in working on their goals.

The extended group may be held in a different location and on a different day than the group usually meets. Often Saturday is used because it is the only day that everyone is free from classes and other obligations. Sometimes group members talk about the sacrifices they make to come to the extended group (e.g., missing a ball game, having to change plans with a person coming to visit, etc.). These all send messages to the group members that they are very important and that the group is an important part of their life. The extended session usually lasts four to five times longer than the regular sessions, and instead of the usual unstructured interpersonal process, some semi-structured exercises and activities can be planned along with the process sessions.

During the extended group session participants are often encouraged to use mediums other than speech such as movement, drawing, or touch to connect with each other. Several of the exercises in the appendices use various modalities. Finally, group leaders may be more active, directive, and informal than they usually appear in the regular group sessions. Some of the directiveness comes naturally from doing semi-structured exercises and having a plan for the day. Therapists may want to dress more casually for comfort purposes but also to signal that there is a different experience being created.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Marathon or extended group sessions can provide some extra needed time for clients to receive important feedback from group members and therapists. The extended sessions also provide an opportunity for clients to move more deeply into their issues. The time spent together can increase the intensity of interactions and reduce the emotional distance among members. Beach (1975/76) found that individuals participating in marathon sessions reported increased self-awareness, greater sensitivity to others, more interpersonal openness, greater honesty, and more self-acceptance.

Marathon groups can also potentially speed up the developmental movement of the group (Allen, 1990). For example, if an extended session occurs toward the middle of the semester-long group, there is often much conflict just before and then during the extended session. The marathon session can provide a safe extended time frame to allow group members to deal effectively and openly with conflict. As the group works though the conflicts, group cohesion usually results. Although the actual duration of an extended session is approximately equivalent

to four regular group sessions, the movement, progress, and impact on the group members seems greater than what usually occurs in four regular sessions. During this intense working, high energy process, group members learn to maximize their gains in the group context.

Stoller (1968) suggested that extended groups create an "accelerated interaction" that fosters and reinforces behavioral breakthroughs. By being deeply involved with individuals in an honest, open way that focuses on the here and now, group members are often able to take significant risks in the direction of meeting behavioral goals. They may not have incorporated the new behavior into their regular repertoire; however, because they have received positive feedback and support for their new interaction in the "group laboratory," they may be more likely to continue engaging in that behavior both in the group and eventually outside of the group. Examples of behavioral breakthroughs within an extended session have included members disclosing very personal, shame-based information about themselves such as that they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered or that they have an eating disorder. One member who was very quiet in other sessions became remarkable assertive and outgoing during an extended session. In the weeks following an extended session, members have reported doing things that they have wanted to do for a long time but did not feel they had the confidence or courage to do so before. For example, one member asked her neighbor out on a date. Another member confronted his parents about abuse issues for the first time.

Extended group sessions also facilitate the integration of what group members have learned in the group. The feedback exercise can particularly help individuals to gather information about how they have performed in group thus far. If a marathon group is held toward

the second half of an ongoing semester group, it can serve as a way to solidify a client's insights and growth and can act as a grand summary of one's group work before beginning the process of termination. Too often the threads and themes of an individual's work in group are not woven together in a clear, patterned way that can be immediately accessed and used. Some members find they have made a lot of movement and change, others see how much more they want to change, and still others see how their minimal risk taking has not paid off well in terms of positive change. Those who profit most not only experience strong affect-based behavioral breakthroughs during the extended group, but are also able to assimilate some cognitive framework of their experience, which make their emotional experience useful and generalizable to situations in their daily lives.

One group member summarized how the marathon session affected her: *The structure and intensity seemed to break down walls between group members, allowing for a better group experience. It helped me to feel less alone, when I heard others express feelings similar to my own. The feedback helped me to feel better about myself and I have begun to take more positive risks in my life.* Another participant stated that the marathon session helped him to build more rapport and trust with others in the group and gave more time to work on difficult issues.

There are some potential disadvantages or difficulties with extended group sessions. Logistically, sometimes it is difficult to find a common day for all group members to attend. Finding a different private meeting area that can accommodate various experiences for the day-long group can be challenging. Sometimes the timing of the marathon session is not optimal for the current work of all group members. In these situations it may be more therapeutic to have a

member who is not ready to not attend the extended group session.

Group leaders of the marathon group must be very aware of the affective experience of the participants by regularly taking note of where each group member is in the process. Yalom, Bond, Bloch, Zimmerman, & Friedman (1977) reported the impact of a weekend group experience on individual therapy and found after the fact that two of the participants suffered psychological damage because they were unable to integrate the powerful feelings unleashed during the extended group session. However, unlike the extended sessions described in this article, the weekend group experience was led by therapists who had not previously worked with the individuals. Prior working knowledge of group members helps the co-leaders to create an experience that can maximize therapeutically usefulness for the participants and not overwhelm them.

Summary and Future Directions

Marathon or extended therapy sessions can be an effective intervention used during short-term process oriented psychotherapy groups. Extended sessions help to increase group cohesion, accelerate the developmental level of the group, and can assist in the integration of feedback and advances that group members have made. Future research could empirically compare the overall effectiveness of short-term groups with and without the extended session component. Research examining the efficacy of using marathon groups is inconsistent in its findings. More methodologically sound studies need to be employed (e.g., Uhlemann & Weigel, 1977) to determine the effectiveness of extended group sessions.

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Appendix A

Marathon Schedule

7:50 - 8:10 am	Mood Tags and Settling in
8:10 - 9:15 am	Introduction to Marathon Session/ Process Group
9:15 - 10:15 am	Family Role Play Exercise (See Appendix B)
10:15 - 10:30 am	Break
10:30 am - Noon	Imagery and Family Portrait Exercise (See Appendix C)
Noon - 1 pm	Lunch
1 pm - 1:30 pm	Movement Exercises 1. What are you feeling paired with a movement. I feel _____. Do movement individually. Group: John feels _____. Everyone does movement. (validation) How was that? If okay move on, if not repeat. 2. Mirroring Exercise - done in pairs, one person follows the other and then there is a switch in leaders, the third time no one is a leader. 3. Knot Game - physical exercise requiring the group to "untie" itself.
1:30 pm - 3 pm	Group Sculpting (See Appendix D)
3 pm - 3:15 pm	Break
3:15 pm - 4:45 pm	Feedback Exercise (Described in the paper.)
4:45 pm - 5:30 pm	Integration/ Closing

Appendix B

Family Role Play Exercise

A. Directions:

Choose a partner and sit in a relaxed position.
Think of one individual who is significant to you. This can be a family member or friend.
Begin by pretending to be that family member and by introducing yourself to the other person.
The other person in the dyad should ask about you (the real you). You should answer as you think the significant person might answer.
For example, (leader can demonstrate with an example of how it might work).
Discuss the real you as if you are not there for a few minutes. I will tell you when to stop.
Then it will be the other person's turn.
OK, introduce yourself now.....[after 4 minutes]...now switch and the other person should introduce themselves as their significant family member or friend now....[after 4 minutes]....

[If you are running early or want to do a longer version, then you can add this part:
Now do the same thing, but with a different person in your life. OK, introduce yourself now...
[after 4 minutes] ....now switch....[after 4 minutes].....]

Now let's collect as a group and discuss the exercise.

B. Processing (some sample questions):

How was that for you?
How was it to play the person you picked?
How was it to listen to the other person?
Did you learn anything new?
What feelings did you experience during the exercise?

* Julie Chapin, a predoctoral intern at Indiana University during the 1996-97 school year, developed this exercise.

Appendix C

Imagery and Family Portrait Exercise

A. Therapist leads group through five minutes of general relaxation. Therapist uses imagery to help group members create a vivid imagine of a home from their childhood.

B. Give out paper and crayons/markers and ask group members to draw a home from their past. Tell them not to worry about the artistic quality. Tell them they have about ten minutes to complete the task.

C. Have each group member explain what is in their picture to the rest of the group in about three to five minutes. Ask the sharing group member to talk about any feelings they have as they describe the picture.

D. Process this exercise for about 30 minutes or so. Some possible questions are:

What was it like for you?
How did you feel when you shared that information?
What was it like to listen?
Did the experience of listening to others trigger any of your own childhood thoughts, feelings, and memories?
Look at your picture again and see if any additional feelings come up. What are they?

* Melinda Stoops, a predoctoral intern at Indiana University during the 1996-97 school year, developed this exercise.

Appendix D

Group Sculpting

Purpose

This is an exercise designed to give members the opportunity to conceptualize their experience of the group and display them to each other in a relatively non-threatening, non-evaluative, and creative manner.

Structure

Each person may take a turn as sculptor.

The sculptor physically places all persons in the group (including facilitators) in a configuration which spatially demonstrates her /his experience of the group.

Only the sculptor may speak during the building of the group sculpture (except the facilitator if necessary).

Each member is allotted about eight minutes to complete the group sculpture.

The sculptor can use as much or as little of the room as needed. Items in the room such as chairs, tables, etc. can be used as props. The posture or facial expressions of the sculptees can be suggested by the sculptor to further illustrate dynamics.

One chair will be designated to indicate where the sculptor is in his/her creation.

When the sculptor is finished, (s)he is invited to spend thirty seconds examining the created group sculpture from various angles asking: Does this reflect how I see the group? The sculptor is asked to consider any last minute changes (s)he is tempted to make. Everyone should be encouraged to make a mental map of each group sculpture and note the affect that goes with that structure. The sculptor end the exercise by sitting in the chair designated for him/her.

As with any group exercise, the amount of risk group members are willing to take will be proportionate to the amount of insight that they may gain.

Sculptees

It is very important for the sculptees to remain as FREE OF JUDGMENT as possible.

The sculpture is about the sculptor's experience. Group members should be aware of their reactions to how and where they were placed.

During the final 30 seconds, sculptees are asked to study the group sculpture and try to empathize with why this sculptor put the sculptee where (s)he did. Also, it is helpful to have the sculptees ask themselves: What is your responsibility in the placement?

After the directions for the exercise are explained, a brief relaxation/imagery exercise is done to help group members to visualize how they want to sculpt the group.

Relaxation / Visualization

Be in this room, at this time. Make yourself comfortable. Focus on your breathing, deep breaths through your nose and long releases through your mouth. As stray thoughts enter your mind allow them to pass without judgment and return your focus to your breathing. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Take four breaths. Let the in-breath fill you with calm and strength, feel the air as it fills your lungs supplying your body with calm strength. Let the exhale empty the anxiety, empty the fear of judgments. Feel the calm strength. Let the anxiety go. Take four to five breaths.
Now open your eyes explore the room, begin to consider the shape of your sculpt. *Breath in calm strength, breath out anxiety and fears.* Consider the other members, how close are they to you, how much power do they wield, what is your relationship to each member, to the group? Picture what your sculpture will look like. We are now ready to begin, remember be honest, take risks, and as sculptees suspend judgments.

After four people have sculpted, the following process questions can be considered by the group. After the final people have gone, another processing session occurs. The second processing session initially focuses on the most recent sculptures and eventually moves to an overall discussion of the entire exercise.

Process Questions

What was this exercise like?
How much anxiety did you experience?
Who was hardest to sculpt? Who was easiest? Discuss.
Do you have a strong need to explain your sculpt?
Explore the need more than the explanation.
What were your reactions/feelings about being sculpted?
Does your sculpt remind you of other significant groups of which you are a member?
How would you like your sculpt to change in the remaining five group sessions?
What do you need to do to facilitate those changes?

* Andrew Shea, a predoctoral intern at Indiana University during the 1997-98 school year, developed this exercise.